FBI Wants To Question John Ray On Shooting Of Urban League Leader

By Charles Bosworth Jr.
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff
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The Federal Bureau of Investigation today began questioning John Larry Ray about the shooting of National Urban League leader Vernon Jordan in Fort Wayne last month, now that Ray is back in custody, FBI Director William H. Webster said today.

Webster said agents would question Ray, the brother of James Earl Ray, confessed assassin of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, about his whereabouts at the time of Jordan's wounding outside a Fort Wayne motel May 29. Although the FBI does not at present consider Ray a suspect, there are some similarities in the shootings of the two civil rights leaders that warrant the questioning of John Larry Ray, FBI authorities said.

Ray, a fugitive, was spotted Monday by a Madison County law enforcement officer walking along a road near Alton, in what the officer called a "10-million-to-1 shot."

Sgt. Conrad "Pete" Baetz of the Madison County Sheriff's Department said he was returning from a shopping trip with his wife while off duty about 5:45 p.m. when he saw a man walking along Illinois Route 140 east of Alton. Baetz said he noticed the man looked like Ray, who was wanted for questioning in a May 30 bank robbery at Liberty, Ill., in Adams County.

Ray also was being sought as a federal escapee for failing to report to a halfway house in St. Louis in February after his release from the federal penitentiary at Marion, Ill., where he served time for bank robbery.

Webster told the Post-Dispatch in a telephone interview that at least two similarities existed between the shootings of the Rev. Dr. King and Jordan. One was the fact that both men were "stalked" by their assailants. The other was that the King assassination was apparently financed by bank robberies. One of the things John Larry Ray is wanted for, Webster noted, is questioning about a bank robbery.

Webster added that it seemed to him that the Ray family has stuck together, no matter what has happened.

A spokesman at the FBI office in Indianapolis, which is handling the investigation of the Jordan shooting,

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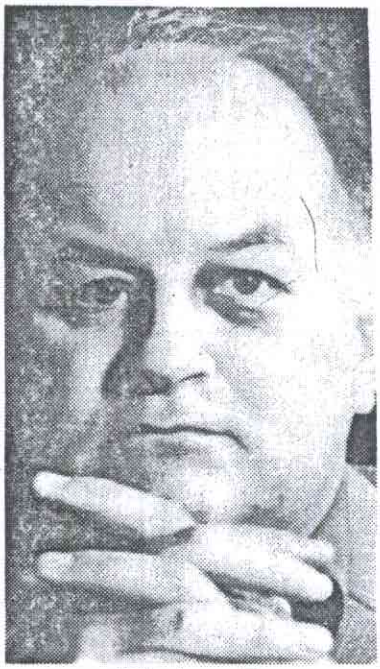

John Larry Ray
"Ch. hi. Conrad"

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had said earlier that John Larry Ray was not a suspect. "We are not seeking him for that purpose," the spokesman said. "We are not aware presently of any connection he has with this matter."

Sgt. Baetz had met John Ray when Baetz was a staff investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations. He had talked to Ray several times, including twice when he served Ray with congressional subpoenas.

On Monday, when Baetz told his wife, Madilyn, that a man they saw walking on the road looked like Ray, she suggested he take another look.

"I turned around and drove past him again," he said. "I said, 'Damn, that is him,'" Baetz said.

Since he was in civilian clothes and was with his wife, Baetz went to a nearby tavern and called the sheriff. Baetz waited for Deputy Thomas Bearce to arrive. Then, as Bearce talked to Ray in front of the patrol car, Baetz approached from the other side.

"To distract him and to confirm his identity, I called him by his nickname, Jack," Baetz said. "When he turned around, that confirmed to me that he was John Larry Ray, so I stuck my gun in his face and told him he was under arrest. After he had been patted down and handcuffed, I asked him if he remembered me. He looked at me and said, 'Oh, hi, Conrad. I thought you were in Edwardsville.' I told him county venue included Alton."

Baetz said Ray, who was wearing a blue leisure suit, did not resist arrest. Baetz would not comment on reports that a loaded pistol was found in a shopping bag Ray was carrying. Baetz said that, to avoid interfering with the investigation of the Liberty bank robbery by the Adams County Sheriff's Department, Ray was not questioned. Ray was scheduled to be arraigned before a circuit judge in Madison County today.

Baetz said he did not know why Ray was in Madison County or where he had been staying.

Baetz said he rode back to County Jail in Edwardsville with Ray. Baetz said Ray told him that he had not been in contact recently with his brother, James Earl Ray, who is in a federal prison in Tennessee. John Larry Ray also told Baetz that he had not been doing much since they last saw each other. "He said they've been keeping him in jail most of the time," Baetz said.

Baetz said Ray had accused him of harassing him during the House investigation of the King assassination; Baetz said a review of the charges produced no evidence of that.

Baetz said he believes Ray should be questioned about the shooting last month of civil rights leader Vernon Jordan in Fort Wayne, Ind.

"There is nothing to indicate John Larry Ray was involved," Baetz said. "However, the possibility should not be ignored. The possibility that John Larry Ray was involved in the King assassination with his brother has not been eliminated, and the circumstances with Jordan are almost identical. A 30.06 rifle was used. Jordan, leader of the National Urban League, was shot in front of his motel. The reports on Jordan sound like the first reports on King. I would never ignore the possibility, but there is nothing to indicate a probability."

Although the FBI has begun questioning John Ray, it apparently has not interviewed a third brother, Jerry. Reached in Marietta, Ga., today, Jerry told the Post-Dispatch that he had not been questioned and, in fact, had had no contact with the FBI over the last several years.

Jerry said that his only knowledge about the Jordan shooting had been what he had heard about it on the news. He said that he had been in contact with his brother James only once in recent weeks, and he denied that any of the brothers had been involved in the Liberty Bank robbery or the Jordan shooting.

J.B. Forbes/Post-Dispatch

Sgt. Conrad "Pete" Baetz

"Damn, that is him"

Said Baetz of his chance encounter Monday with Ray: "It was a 10 million-to-1 shot. I'm without a doubt the only guy in the area that has met John Larry Ray."

The FBI had been among several agencies searching for Ray. The FBI entered the case only last week when the bureau and St. Louis police were notified of Ray's escape four months after the fact. St. Louis Police Chief Eugene J. Camp and Robert Kingsland, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Missouri, were critical of the delay, saying they should have been notified immediately.

Baetz manned the St. Louis area office of the House Assassinations Committee in 1977 and 1978 while on a leave of absence from his job with the Madison County Sheriff's Department. Baetz had been assigned to learn whether James Earl Ray had accomplices in this area. James Ray was born in Alton and lived for several years in St. Louis.

Baetz is a native of Alton. Before joining the Sheriff's Department in 1970, he was a legal technician with Army Intelligence.